

“You Just Use Your Imagination and Try to Fix It”: Agential Change and International Students

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ABSTRACT

Although interest in the experiences of international students has increased, the theoretical frameworks that are used to explain their experiences (such as culture shock, models of acculturation, cultural learning or intercultural dimensions) all share a tendency to use culture to explain behavior, denying agency, and leaving changes in the way that subjects engage with the world poorly explained. Using Margaret Archer’s concept of reflexivity (2003, 2007, 2012), this study shows how participants’ agency changes as a direct result of their experiences as international students. Drawing on case-studies of two students at a university in the southwest of England, this article shows that subjects must confront new constraints and opportunities, compelling them into reflexive deliberation, necessitating a change in agency.

Keywords: culture, structure, agency, international students, reflexivity

The number of international students studying at universities in the United Kingdom has increased dramatically in recent years. In 2015, there were 428,724 international students studying at degree level or higher in the United Kingdom, a little under 10% of the global total (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017), and this is only expected to increase despite the continuing uncertainty over the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. Studies on the experiences of international students repeatedly demonstrate the significant change in the way that participants engage with the world as a direct result of their experiences as international students, in

particular changes in identity (Montgomery, 2010; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013; Hotta & Ting-Toomey, 2013), agency (Marginson, 2013) and maturation (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2015). This article examines the concept of agency (i.e., the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of life, Bandura, 2001) and Archer's (2007) related concept of reflexivity as "the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts" (p. 2) to consider how the international student experience directly affects the way that participants engage with the world.

Despite over 80 years of intercultural research—with over 100 theories of acculturation (Rudmin, 2009)—the theoretical constructs that are typically used to explain the international student experience all share the generic problem of conflation in that they tend to use culture as a categorizing agent or nationality as a proxy for culture (Gargano, 2012). This has the effect of reducing individuals to the habitualized behaviors determined by characteristics of their national culture (e.g., individual-collectivist explanations of behavior) or emotional responses to the environment (such as culture shock). This denies individuals any agency and contributes to the persistence of what Marginson (2013) refers to as a "deficit model" of international students, leaving the change in the way that international students exercise action as a result of their experiences poorly explained.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The sociologist Margaret Archer (2003) argues that this tendency to attribute causality to culture is a generic defect of much social theory (what she terms downward conflation). According to Archer, society exists in an open system, meaning that it is impossible to isolate causal mechanisms to test (as a scientist would test a physical phenomenon). Therefore, research must rely on explanatory frameworks which infer cause and effect. In the case of acculturation models, causation is typically ascribed to culture (particularly cultural differences), denying the causal powers of thought and reflection and an individual's ability to exercise control of their own lives.

In response to this, Archer argues that social research demands an ontology (that is, an explanation of what it is to be a social being) in order to allow for a systematic and structured analysis of social phenomena. Archer's realist ontology is exhibited most clearly in her critique of the structure-agency dichotomy. In particular, she applies a temporal dimension to the critique of social theory showing that culture and social structures

necessarily predate agency as individuals are socialized into a society. The “genesis” of agency occurs within these structures (such as the family or an educational system), as it is structure that provides the constraints and enablements within which agents act. Social interaction may reinforce existing habitual actions, which in turn reinforce existing social structures (what Archer calls morphostasis). However, individuals can respond creatively to structural constraints and opportunities (in the same way that grammatical rules of language can result in novel and creative utterances), which elaborates social structures creating new arrangements of social relations (what Archer calls morphogenesis). Morphogenesis may involve changes in power relations or reconfigurations of social relations which elaborate social structures, resulting in more or less room for agential maneuver. Therefore, as structure changes, so agency changes in relational terms. In this way, Archer shows that structure and agency are intertwined, but separable, and can therefore each be analyzed on their own (what Archer calls analytical dualism). Archer’s systematic analysis of the structure-agency dichotomy provides a way of being able to explore the conditioning effects of social structures.

Archer notes that historically, culture and structure tended to reproduce, and, as a result, social structures were fairly fixed. This is grounded on the notion that habitual actions, defined by Camic (1986) as “a more or less self-actuating disposition or tendency to engage in a previously adopted or acquired form of action” (p. 1044), provide individuals with both an attachment to their culture and with the social and cultural resources appropriate for their context, that is, “I know what others know” (what Archer calls contextual continuity). However, the international student experience is situated during a period of history marked by rapid social, economic, and technological change, where an individual’s natal context (the situational context from which an individual achieves their socialized routines and habits) is no longer necessarily a preparation for the world they will enter, which Archer calls contextual discontinuity. As past certainties no longer present a clear pathway through the life course, and the future world changes too fast to prepare for, individuals are driven to reflect upon themselves and how they fit into their world, which shapes their actions and results in structural change. According to the rules of analytical dualism, objective changes in social structures place agents within different constraints and opportunities, in which they find a need to subjectively deliberate (in relation to their own concerns). It is this reflexivity, Archer argues, which determines the agent’s courses of action in relation to their own context. For international students, contextual discontinuity is obvious,

though it is often conceptualized as shock. What Archer offers for explanations of cultural transition is that disruption or interruption to habitual action compels individuals into reflexive deliberation (the reflexive imperative). As individuals find themselves in a new set of structural constraints, selection is narrowed and subjects must engage in reflexive deliberation to find an effective course of action from the opportunities available.

The concept of reflexivity forms the basis of most of Archer's (2003, 2007, 2012) later work. Drawing on the American pragmatist tradition (particularly George Mead and Charles Peirce), Archer (2003) conceptualizes reflexivity as an internal conversation, defined as those conversations that people engage with internally (for example "What am I going to do with myself today?"). This internal conversation is the mechanism which mediates between structure and agency, reflecting on the external ("What is going on?"), informing action ("What am I going to do?") and actualizing the causal efficacy of structures. Therefore, Archer observes that agency emerges from the cumulative experiences of the circumstances that confront an individual, as subjects find a need to exercise reflexive deliberation in response to their context. The more that the contexts change, the more there is a need to work hard reflexively to negotiate the new context.

Central to Archer's conceptualization of reflexivity is that the internal conversation is a socialized behavior, which is exercised differently by different people in different contexts. In her research of first year sociology students, Archer (2012) observes a tendency for particular features of natal contexts to explain the variance in the ways that individuals engage with the world. Particular events in an individual's situational context provide the circumstances within which reflexive dispositions evolve that are favorable for the development of a particular mode of reflexivity. She identifies four ideal types of reflexivity: communicative reflexives, autonomous reflexives, meta-reflexives, and fractured reflexives. A communicative reflexive is born into a natal context with "the generation of sufficient trust and mutual concern for some family member to become an interlocutor upon whom the subject could rely to complete and confirm the distinctive reflexive pattern of 'thought and talk'" (Archer, 2012, p. 130). As such, an individual in this context would be inclined to recreate those circumstances for themselves, and therefore decide on courses of action, in conversation with others, which result in cultural and structural reproduction. However, Archer notes that contextual discontinuity can deprive individuals of the trusted interlocutors with which an individual can

seek to confirm a course of action and therefore leaves less opportunity for reproducing the natal context. Therefore, an individual may develop a new reflexive disposition, in relation to their own subjective deliberations of their situational context.

The autonomous reflexive is characterized by the absence of particular relational goods meaning the natal context cannot be reproduced as there is no consensus to be reproduced. Archer observes that the autonomous reflexive confronts this situational logic by making decisions for themselves, resulting in a tendency for individuals to engage with the world independently, perhaps not taking into consideration how their decisions will be thought of by others. Autonomous reflexives have internal conversations characterized by purpose and instrumentality, and may make decisions related to material concerns. Meanwhile, meta-reflexives confront a situational context characterized by a problematic social order generating a desire to reject the social order, and giving rise to a need to find an alternative course of action. Values and ideas become important to a meta-reflexive, and, for some, a need to “make a difference” is important. A meta-reflexive may deliberate on whether they are making decisions ethically, and may refer to certain values as a way of underpinning decision making. Finally, fractured reflexivity refers to those individuals whose internal conversations do not lead to a course of action that results in a satisfactory conclusion. Archer notes that, for fractured reflexives, the internal conversation intensifies emotions, rather than producing an effective course of action. The table below summarizes the various modes of reflexivity identified by Archer and how they may be realized.

Table 1. Modes of reflexivity.

Mode of reflexivity	Relations with natal background	Relations with home friends	Response to situational logic of opportunity	Relations with new friends based on
Communicative reflexives	Identifiers	Retention	Rejection	Commonalities
Autonomous reflexives	Independents	Selection	Competitive adaptation	Interests
Meta-reflexives	Disengaged	Rejection	Embrace	Values
Fractured reflexives	Rejecters	Absence	Passivity	Dependency

Note. Adapted from Archer (2012, p. 293).

Archer's work has very clear implications for how the international student experience is understood. International students must confront a new situational context with different sets of habitualized routines, values and dispositions ("I don't know what others know"), compelling participants into reflexive deliberation about what to do instead. The international student experience is also marked by a sudden lack of available social resources, particularly in the initial stages, and subjects are therefore compelled to engage with the new context independently. Meanwhile, studies (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008; Smith and Khajawa, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010) also emphasise the difficulties participants have in the new context, and disorientation may lead to stress, anxiety and a difficulty in exercising agency in a way that is useful. There is a need, therefore, to explore how international students engage with their new context in order to better understand how they exercise agency and how this changes as a result of their experiences as international students.

METHOD

In this paper, the experiences of two participants are presented as case studies of agential change during their time as international students. The reasons for this are, firstly, to examine empirically how subjects engaged with their social world and, secondly, how this changed over time. The study of agency is necessarily subjective, so a small-scale case study approach was adopted in order to apply Archer's framework to real-life events, while allowing the experiences of the subjects of the case-studies to be explored in depth (obviously care should be taken when generalizing to larger student populations). The two interviewees presented in this paper were both Computer Science classmates of a similar age, though from very different backgrounds. Stacy (18) was a self-funded student from Yekaterinburg in Russia, while Rania (19) was a scholarship student from Tripoli in Libya. These two were chosen because although they had different natal contexts, they were both on a similar life trajectory, which meant that comparisons of how their experiences as international students had shaped their lives was very useful.

This research uses narrative inquiry (or narrative research) to capture the subjective interpretations of an interviewee's own internal conversations. Smith (2007) links narrative inquiry to routinized or habitualized action, particularly Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, arguing that narratives are constructions "sourced from the past" (p. 395). He argues that

there is a continuity in the narratives people construct about their own experiences—people tell the same stories over time—and an individual's dispositions, values and routines may be revealed in these narratives. Changes in narrative may reveal something about changes in identity, perspective or maturity, and as dispositions and values change, these may emerge from the stories people tell about their lives.

Subjects were interviewed (unstructured interviews, which allowed for in depth discussion about differing contexts) twice during the academic year (once in November 2014 and once in March 2015). Each interview took between 30 and 45 min. Interviews were transcribed, read, re-read and coded in order to identify events, deliberations and action, and these were compared over the two interviews to identify any changes in the way agency was exercised as a result of the subject's experiences as international students. These case studies were part of a much larger mixed-methods research project at a university in the southwest of England. All names have been changed to protect the identity of the students who participated in the study.

RESULTS

Rania

Rania, 19 at the time of the first interview, was an international student from Tripoli in Libya, studying Computer Science on a government scholarship. The scholarship included a year of English language, which she studied at a language school in Cambridge, a foundation course, and a Bachelor's degree. The generous scholarship was offered to the highest performing students in Libya. Rania had received the second highest grades in Libya. Rania's father was a doctor in Tripoli, who had studied in Germany when Rania was young (and where she had spent some time), and her mother was also a doctor.

Rania was close to her family and her friends. The most important person in Rania's life was her best friend Hauwa (a Pathology student), who was with her in the United Kingdom, and they had known each other since primary school. As Rania said, "Hauwa is my best friend. Our friendship has been based on achievement and what I want to do in my future ... it was pretty much not the typical kind of friendship." Rania deferred an entire academic year to come to the United Kingdom with Hauwa, so that Hauwa could get her English to the right level (Rania had already reached the required English requirements for her foundation programme) stating, "I

actually sacrificed a whole year for her,” but this turned out to be useful as Rania worked towards and passed an English proficiency exam. Hauwa wanted to study Pathology—only the current university offered a foundation course with a pathway to Pathology, and as a result, Rania followed Hauwa there. If Hauwa had not met the requirements for their chosen university, “even if I was accepted, and I get the grades and everything, I will have to move, because we can’t be separate.” Her description of her relationships suggested a tendency towards communicative reflexivity, which was reinforced by parental and wider cultural pressures, where young Muslim women travelling abroad are required to be accompanied by a male relative. Neither Rania nor Hauwa had a male relative who could accompany them, so they came to the United Kingdom on the understanding that they would remain together. She was also good friends with another Libyan scholarship student on the international foundation programme.

Her natal context was characterized by close and supportive relationships with her family and friends. As she stated, “I was quite pampered at home, like kind of a spoiled girl, my parents would go to work and there would be a maid taking care of the house and I wouldn’t worry about anything. I would just get up, eat and go out with my friends.” Her early life was such that she had never had to work hard reflexively, leading to a path of social and cultural reproduction of her natal context, supported by familial and institutional structures. Rania frequently displayed tendencies towards communicative reflexivity—her desire to find work in Libya, the close relationships and sacrifices she made with those close to her and her tendency to make decisions in relation with Hauwa.

However, such contextual continuity became more and more difficult to maintain as a result of the conflict in Libya. Rania’s life in Libya contrasted dramatically with her life in the United Kingdom, and her situational logic was, naturally, to avoid the former because it was so upsetting, pointing out that “I don’t have Facebook and news is one of the reasons why I don’t have it, like when I see my friends, ‘oh, someone was killed here, someone was kidnapped there.’” Her parents and friends remained well, but their safety was a source of real anxiety, “I really cared so much and I was like crying and so worried and actions and praying [sic]. But at a point I just gave up, like, I’m helpless, I cannot do anything here.” Her family, friends and institutions, both in the form of the university and the sponsorship programme, provided strong buffers and Rania was optimistic about her personal future, “even if you tell me five years’ time, it will be okay.”

Despite the challenges facing Libya, she still felt a deep connection with home, and she imagined her long-term future in Libya, “I really want to go home. I want to work back in Libya and participate in something or at least have a role in something, but I think this may be too difficult.” While Rania was initially marked as a communicative reflexive, she was necessitated into selection by her situational context. The quest for similarity and familiarity which characterizes communicative reflexivity no longer existed, as she had reflexivity imposed upon her by the situation in Libya. The imperative to select a course of action resulted in Rania following a situational logic of opportunity, conferred onto her by the structures in which she was embedded. She was fortunate to have been offered a generous scholarship to study abroad, which she was appreciative of (“they are spoiling us”).

Rania was compelled into reflexive deliberation about her future due to the lack of a structured path in the long term. Her reflections on life after study often saw her imagining herself working abroad, “maybe Canada,” but she maintained a strong preference for returning to Libya. She worked hard reflexively to maintain close relationships, particularly with her boyfriend (in Libya), “it’s basically like my work to keep the relationship going cos he’s free and it’s me who gets busy and might be distracted so I’m trying my best to keep it as close as possible.” Rania repeatedly demonstrated a tendency towards a communicative mode of reflexivity, but it took her a lot of energy to maintain. Her boyfriend was doing well at his job (“they want him to be a director”) and it was difficult to see how Rania could maintain this relationship in the long term and continue with her studies. At the same time, she and Hauwa were spending less time with each other, “we’re not going to go our separate ways. She’s gonna have her own world, like, career-wise and I’m gonna have mine, but we’ll still be friends.”

As a result, Rania exhibited the emergence of a meta-reflexive mode of reflexivity, where an individual confronting contextual discontinuity cannot reproduce their imagined way of life, so is necessitated to select a course of action based on their own personal concerns. According to Archer (2012), meta-reflexives generally experience a problematic social order in the natal context, resulting in an openness to the situational logic of opportunity. For Rania, there was no opportunity to reproduce the social order, despite her desire to do so, and she was compelled into reflexive deliberation about what to do instead. Fortunately for Rania, she received the opportunity to study abroad, which was “an opportunity no-one should miss.”

Meta-reflexivity is characterized by a tendency towards critique of the social order, often by distancing oneself from others. Rania demonstrated her own meta-reflexivity in contrast with others on her course, particularly the mostly male students in her computer science course. She reflected on the computer science open day she attended at the university, and on her own position in relational terms:

“There were so many guys there and most of them, I could tell, were not that friendly, not that sociable. It was just me and the girls talking together and the guys were separated ... I don’t want computer science to be restricted to men and socially awkward guys who don’t interact with people. I actually want to do the subject and encourage people after time to go and explore ... like some girls, I mean, to do the subject ... I’m not terrified of that at all, I’ve thought about it, but I don’t think it will cause me any trouble in the future.”

Moreover, meta-reflexives have a tendency to embrace a cause, which provides a “testing ground” through which any future course of action may be articulated (Carrigan, 2013). A repeated theme in both interviews was Rania’s desire to help women in computer science, “like female computer engineers are a minority back home, so I would really want to be an addition to them.” However, a direct pathway to achieve this was difficult to imagine. “like reflecting from now, I think it will be more difficult for me. It would be less flowing than the ideas in my head.” While her personal concerns drove her decisions, structural constraints blocked a clear pathway, meaning she had to consider alternative courses of action. Nevertheless, she was strongly motivated to “make a difference.” She stated that, “my main goal is to go home in Libya and...I’m not sure what I really want to do, but I want to do something that motivates women and computers and have their role.” While a precise course of action was difficult to imagine, the values underpinning her choices were unambiguous. Her ‘proto-commitments’ were becoming more and more refined during her time abroad, and they were beginning to play a role in shaping her life.

Rania was not typical of a meta-reflexive in Archerian terms, since Archer (2012) argues that meta-reflexives tend to be “loners rather than individualists” (p. 208). Rania was neither, she worked hard on and valued her relationships. She was extremely gregarious and popular with other students. Rania’s meta-reflexivity was grounded on the lack of opportunity to reproduce the social order. The pursuit of similarity and familiarity which is typical of communicative reflexivity was no longer possible, and Rania

had selection imposed on her. Although she acknowledged that she had become more independent during her time abroad, her instinct was still to make decisions relationally, in consultation with others. However, this was becoming increasingly difficult to do. Instead, for Rania it was her values that increasingly determined her decisions.

Rania acknowledged that she had changed a lot already during her time abroad, “but it is this experience that’s definitely gonna make me change, like, I wouldn’t imagine coming here having to go through all this and still be the same person. No way.” She made friends easily and she evaluated her experiences positively:

“Socially, I find I’ve developed great and strong friendships with my friendship ... I think it has to do with the diversity in the class. For example, if one third of a class, or half of it, was from a certain nationality then they would basically form a group and they would be more close, but each of us is from a different country ... so we’re kind of enforced to befriend each other ... can I just say we clicked just like straight away, like none of us had any difficulties with anyone else.”

These relationships provide Rania with the opportunity to engage the world in new ways, and she was able to experiment with the social order. At the same time, Rania had strong and durable support from her parents and her friends, which provided Rania with strong relational goods. These relational goods provided Rania with useful resources with which to negotiate her future. However, since there was no longer a consensus to be reproduced, it was Rania’s values that were shaping her future life. Her immediate short term was well structured, funded by her government and supported by her friends, family and institutions. She and her friend Hauwa both progressed onto their programmes without any problems. She will have three more years at university to experiment with the social order and develop a course of action that is useful to her.

Stacy

Stacy (18 at the time of the first interview) was from Yekaterinburg in Russia and had one sister, 17 years younger than her. Stacy’s parents both worked in IT (they have their own company). Her grandparents paid for her university fees (her grandfather is a builder), while her parents paid her living expenses. While she considered herself (and her family) “high middle class” in Russia, money was a primary concern throughout her time abroad,

“definitely middle class could not afford this.” This contrasted sharply with how she perceived her social status in relation to her peers, who “are more like top of the middle class, high upper class. There are a lot of people who don’t worry about money.” In relation to others at the university, she saw herself with a different status, placing herself “at the bottom of the middle class.” Status was associated with wealth, but also with behavior, “some of them, like, behaving posh and some of them are normal people.”

Stacy was classified as a meta-reflexive, a mode of reflexivity which Archer (2012) states is characterized by a problematic social order, rather than internalized (for communicative reflexives) or normalized (for autonomous reflexives). Meta-reflexives experience contextual incongruity, a feature of late modernity where an individual’s natal context does not provide them with the resources to transition to adult life smoothly. As a result of this lack of consensus between the natal context and the individual’s life, the meta-reflexive is driven to reflexive deliberation about what to do instead.

Stacy’s response to contextual incongruity was to study abroad: “since I was 14 or something like that, I was thinking about going to study abroad, because I really wanted this, it’s like ... everything is different and I find it more interesting and I kind of wanted to explore and enjoy the different way of life.” Stacy’s life was shaped by the situational logic of opportunity, and, since there was no consensus to be reproduced, she embraced the unfamiliar and sought out new experiences.

She chose to study Computer Science, having some experience designing websites for small businesses in her home town, because it is “quite applied, you can create something and you feel accomplished when you do it and it really works.” Archer observes that the meta-reflexives in her study chose their degree not through instrumental rationality, but because it fit in with their own personal concerns and what they cared about most. This is true, too, of Stacy, who reflected on what she would do with her Computer Science degree in the future: “Maybe some time after I’ll do a Masters or a PhD whatever, I’d like to continue the education. I’m not sure I’ll be also Computer Science or maybe a change to something else.” Work is not the end, but the means to the end. Stacy was still uncertain about her place in the world, but studying abroad was very much part of her project, as was study, though she aspired to study something she was interested in. In her second interview, Stacy elaborated on her long term plans stating, “I also want to study something like literature or psychology, or philosophy, which is just basically for myself, for what I am interested in and I’ll do this, but just later, when I’m able to sustain myself.” She chose computer science

because it was creative and would give her the opportunity to fund her ideal lifestyle.

When she reflected on her experiences, she remarked on how well she had adapted in relation to others: “I know I feel I am more adapted to life than some people, when I compare.” She also talks of how she confronted the reflexive imperative and how she deliberated on her social world:

*“Here there is no one to control you and you have to think carefully and be aware of your actions. Not all can do this, and this might be the way I grow up ... I was even more adapted to life. When you get in a situation and you don’t know what to do, **you just use your imagination and try to fix it** (emphasis added).”*

She compared herself to others around her, who “don’t know what to do, they just get lost.”

These reflections were important to her. Reflexivity possesses genuine causal efficacy, and the interplay between Stacy’s nascent concerns and the structural enablements in which she existed shaped how she viewed herself: “Before I was the same person but I didn’t have the chance to show my personality, like, to actually be myself. And now, when I’m feeling comfortable with the people I have I can do it, like, I can be who I am and I really like it.”

However, Stacy did not always find an effective way through the situational context. There were times when the difficulties she faced meant she was unable to exercise an effective course of action (a feature of fractured reflexivity). For example, Stacy had chosen as one of her options an undergraduate module in psychology, despite not needing to, and not having studied psychology before. Because of this she struggled academically in this subject: “I don’t really go to [psychology] lectures, but at the same time, I’ll be reading the book and I’ll be doing my own research on, like, something interesting.” Her own internal conversation provided no effective course of action, and the lack of opportunity for “thought and talk” meant that she had to confront this situation on her own. Stacy ultimately failed this module, and, as a result, did not meet the requirements for progressing to the next year of university.

Stacy’s reasoning was typical of meta-reflexives, who, Archer (2012) notes, “tend to search and experiment with the sociocultural system” (p. 203). It is this that defines a meta-reflexive and leads to a tendency for them to embrace a cause, however vague. Stacy’s cause was the international life. She had no plans to return to Russia permanently,

“Hopefully, I’ll stay . . . after I finish, I’ll maybe move to the United Kingdom because I plan to get the citizenship . . . I don’t see a good reason of going back to Russia.” Stacy had reflexivity imposed on her through a mismatch between her concerns and her context and this situational logic led to her embracing difference. Her interests and values became more refined during her year, and, while they still remained vague by the end of the year, she saw her future away from Russia.

When reflecting on her life in Russia, she often placed herself in contradistinction with others. For example, in her second interview, she talked of her experiences on holiday with her family: “When I was in Dubai with my parents, it was like a horror story for me, ‘cos they always tend to comment something or do jokes [about Arabs] in kind of a bad way for me. They were even getting mad at me for this.” Archer (2012) observes that there is “[almost] nothing that [meta-reflexives] seek to replicate from their natal background” (p. 207). Although Stacy was close to her friends from her hometown, she distanced herself from them (or noticed a distance between them) over the course of the year stating, “people back home might change the way they see me . . . I don’t know, we don’t really talk.” This contrasts sharply with how she described her friends from the United Kingdom, noting that, “some other people . . . they became closer to me, so, like, I can count on them and I trust them . . . I’m really happy I have these guys . . . that’s like the kind of friendship (I have) been basically looking for.”

Making connections or distancing oneself is reflexive. Exploring who and why an individual makes or maintains connections with reveals something about their reflexivity. Stacy made decisions about her life often explicitly in contrast to others, and the perceived static life in Russia was viewed as something to be avoided. For example, while she acknowledged that her high school grades were not good enough to enter a top university in Russia, she rejected the alternative her hometown university (the state university) as being too provincial: “In my city, the university, a lot of people from my province’s school go to study there as well and I don’t quite enjoy seeing their face every day.” Studying abroad was a strategy first to avoid the perceived torpidity of her home country, and second an opportunity to engage in her international lifestyle.

Stacy evaluated her experiences very positively, particularly her friendships. While Archer (2012) notes the tendency for meta-reflexives to be loners, she acknowledges that most meta-reflexives are eager for new experiences and new people with whom to share them. Stacy made strong and deep friendships very quickly. She was very close with a group of four

friends, Roman from Thailand, Zoe from Vietnam and Darren from Colombia, and they spent much of their spare time with each other. However, these friendships still needed negotiating: “Since Darren moved and I started going to Roman’s place as well, Zoe started getting a little mad at me, that I’m not spending much time with her, but like we’re fine, we still talk and everything.” Moreover, Stacy was very conscious of the difference in status between her and her close friends, with cost of living being a real concern, and she found it difficult to maintain their pace of life:

“I’m basically poor and they don’t say anything about it, because how the world works, there are people who have money and you, you don’t have that much money and there’s people who usually drag you to expensive places, restaurants and like, they’re not paying for you, and you have to struggle and ask money all the time, and this is really difficult. If they ask me to go somewhere with them, they’ll actually give £1 to me, and I have to add £1.”

These unequal relations shaped how she perceived herself in relation to others and she came to strange arrangements with her friends. “If they know I don’t really have food or anything, I’ll become like, for example with Roman, how it works, for me it’s perfect and for him probably as well, we have like a studio room, it’s with a kitchen and he just buys food. I cook the food, I clean after myself and after him and I clean the whole kitchen. So he basically does nothing.” When asked how she felt about this, she acknowledged, “sometimes I feel like that’s a bit wrong, but no-one complained about this.”

Despite her problems with money and her need to get a job, her actions were ineffective and her deliberations were a little naive. When asked if she was looking for work to help fund her studies, the contextual discontinuity, her lack of knowledge and experience about applying for work in the United Kingdom and the lack of opportunity for “thought and talk” again meant she had to confront this situation on her own, and she was unable to find work: “I went to the website and there’s like jobs and most of them is like paralegals or something really hard to get cos you either have to work their full time and you need to have experience, which I don’t have.” Visa restrictions meant she was only able to work for 10 hr a week, while most part time jobs required people to work for 12 hr. Stacy did not have the social or cultural capital to find the kind of job that she needed.

Her desire to continue with her undergraduate course with her friends meant she was ill prepared for not progressing: “When I applied to universities, it was like basically for nothing ... I was quite confused of my

choice. Some people have universities they can go to if they fail, and I don't." For these reasons, there were times when Stacy displayed tendencies that were typical of a fractured reflexive, a mode of reflexivity characterized by an internal conversation which intensifies disorientation. However, this did not become Stacy's dominant mode of reflexivity. In this sense, she may be best characterized temporarily as a displaced reflexive (Archer, 2003), a sub-category of fractured reflexivity where she had yet to fully develop her dominant mode of reflexivity. Stacy was able to exercise reflexivity, but the short term demands of the international student experience (particularly academic concerns and financial concerns) did not allow her to impose any longer term plan of action, and the difficulties she encountered temporarily delayed the development of her meta-reflexivity.

Stacy's relational goods did not provide her with the resources necessary to successfully realize an effective course of action in the short term. Nevertheless, Stacy was overwhelmingly positive about her experiences and the friendships that she made (which were central to her project), and she acknowledged the effect these had had on her character: "I'm happy with my experiences actually, with time you have to realize about yourself, about life and just, like, how to behave." And despite struggling at times during her course, she remained optimistic about her future "I'm really optimistic about it because all that I have now, it gives me motive to go for it and to move so I'll be able to get what I want. And I know that I'll get what I want. If I want this, I will get it."

At the end of the year, Stacy's close friendship group was separated. While they had all planned to remain close friends once they were at university, only one of the group of four continued with their intended course. Stacy did not get the grades required to continue with her studies, while another of her friends, Darren from Colombia, could not afford the fees after the collapse in value of the Colombian peso made it twice as expensive for him. Stacy's closest friend, Zoe, chose instead to go to another university because the course was better suited to the career she wanted. Stacy ended up going to study computer science at another university in England, and therefore was still able, through structural enablements conferred on to her by the social structures in which she was embedded, to have the opportunity to realize her short term aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Archer's (2012) framework provides a way of demonstrating how habitualized modes of engaging with the world emerges from the recurrence

of particular events (the link between structure and agency). For Archer (2012), habitual action is “blocked by problematic circumstances” (p. 48), and it is within this context that reflexive deliberation achieves primacy as individuals are compelled into modifying their habitualized behaviors. This has really strong implications for how we understand the international student experience. The tendency in intercultural theory for cultural explanations of social action reduces agency to mere habitual actions, and does not currently provide an adequate way of explaining the variety of responses to the situational context, how individuals may exercise innovative action in the new context or how the emergence of agency may be impeded. Archer’s (2003, 2007, 2012) research provides a way of explaining the genesis of habitual action, from an individual’s ability to act creatively and innovatively to a new context, which becomes habitualized over time.

The interviews in this study demonstrate that subjects experienced a significant change in the way that they engaged with the world as a direct result of their experiences as international students. The events they confronted presented them with a particular structural context in which they were compelled into reflexive deliberation (“I don’t know what others know”). Structures in the new context, such as linguistic boundaries or cultural boundaries, narrowed selection, constraining agency. Conversely, learning a new language or opportunities to experiment with the social order presented participants with new ways of engaging with the world. As a result, subjects had to work hard reflexively to negotiate their experiences engaging in reflexive deliberation to find an effective course of action from the opportunities available.

Innovative action (mediated by reflexive deliberation) takes up more energy, meaning that these experiences may be more stressful, or they may be more exhilarating. Particular features of social structure may elicit a particular situational logic, and from a recurrence of these events means that over time, this mode of reflexivity becomes routinized. In this way, disruptions to habitual actions may result in the adoption of new habits, values or dispositions as individuals adopt new behaviors and values that are more congruous with their new environment (the causal power of reflexive deliberation). This explanation does not rule out an emotional response to the environment altogether, though. A disruption to habitual action may intensify emotion or anxiety, meaning that an effective alternative course of action may not be found (possibly further intensifying emotion or anxiety).

This paper introduces the importance of reflexive deliberation in the transition of international students. Explanations of student transitions

require a temporal dimension of analysis—that particular events necessarily precede changes in agency, identity and maturity. There is a need for further research to find important differences and commonalities that different circumstances may condition the way subjects engage with the world. While each individual will clearly have their own unique pathway to adulthood, it is possible to identify particular events or structural features which may condition student agency in a particular way. It is important that future research continues to seek causal explanations for the transition of international students.

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